

## THE LIES WE TELL

Our mind tells a pretty good story; the question is: how true is it? Because of the personal nature of the meaning we make and other perceptual idiosyncrasies I will come to shortly, it is fair to ask whether we construct a world that is entirely of our own making. I take a view that is not pure constructivism whereby the world we bring forth (to use Maturana's term) or enact (to use Varela's term) is co-created by an interaction between our own proactive mind and an actual physical world. So I distinguish between my personal reality and an 'objective' or 'outside' reality that I think of as a useful heuristic, that is, an assumption I make for practical purposes that may be subject to error, but helps me to get along with my fellows.

The idea that the brain is a story-making organ is another very useful approximation for explaining and understanding the mind. It is widely used, but I got it from Mary E. Clark, who was at a public University in Virginia, USA, and who I had the privilege of meeting a few years ago. She wrote an influential book called *In Search of Human Nature* from which I have drawn and also *Ariadne's Thread - The Search for New Modes of Thinking*.

We tell others what we know in the form of stories. Often, we make them sound very intellectual and abstract, but they are still essentially about our own personal experience, what we did or read or thought. The story draws our meanings together into the format that best suits our intensely social existence. We evolved from more primitive species by telling one another stories.

The primary story is the one about who I am and where I fit in the scheme of things. This is so precious to each of us that if it is threatened by the stories that other people are telling we will work very hard, even fight to the death, to defend it. It is our belief system and our world view and it has to make sense to us; otherwise that essential element of life, the ability to make meaning, could be lost. We can update our story every time we encounter a triggering input from another person, but only as long as we can retain its essential coherence. Otherwise we must reject conflicting ideas, or at least set them aside for the time being.

One consequence of this need to cling to our story is that we are inclined to tell lies - to ourselves and to other people. *Why We Lie* is an interesting book by Dorothy Rowe who is a psychologist and author I have long admired and had the pleasure of meeting over an afternoon tea in Sydney. She was born in Adelaide (in 1930), but has lived in the UK since her forties. Those of her 16 books that I have read fit very well with the enactive theory of mind. In *Why We Lie* she said she was surprised that so many people still don't realise that we make our own individual meaning. She never liked the conventional medical model for depression and mental illness generally, instead using 'personal construct theory,' which is closer to the way of thinking espoused here.

The lies we tell may be inconsequential when they are matters of convenience such as casual responses to the question: how are you? It may not be helpful to describe your sore toe in great detail every time. All the same, being scrupulously honest with our close friends helps us to be honest with ourselves; it's the best way to check that one's story isn't veering away from the commonsense reality that is assisting social cohesion.

To put it into perspective, your story is not going to be the complete truth anyway because you don't know what you don't know. Someone else can see things about me that I am not aware of, which may well be true, at least for them. So in this sense the truth is a personal meaning.

Yet truth is a precious commodity in our society. Some of the lies revealed in public were

harmless such as the one told by an Australian Federal Court judge to try to avoid a \$77 speeding fine, but the heads of various UK banking institutions and some people at Enron and Bear Stearns in the USA and in other large companies nearly wrecked our financial system with their lies. Dorothy Rowe urged us to be less tolerant of the culture of deliberate lying that seems to be normal in politics and business. By accepting as inevitable the peddling of inaccurate and misleading stories in the interests of a government or a company we are encouraging it.

It is when lies damage the fabric of our connectedness, usually in order to protect the individual, that we are headed for the destruction of our society and ourselves. This happens when there is insufficient trust or respect for others so someone feels the need to control and manipulate his fellow humans to make them do what he thinks will be best, at least for him and his associates.

Unfortunately, this is made more widespread because people don't necessarily realise they are doing it. The pernicious effects of the 'objectivist' theory of meaning are evident here. People argue vehemently with one another about the nature of reality because the 'facts' as they understand them are different from the 'facts' as somebody else understands them. But it is not necessarily a problem that we understand things differently as long as we don't insist on making others see it and do it our way. What is more important than 'I am right and you are wrong' is the quality of our relationships, which stems from respect for one another as human beings.

I think truth boils down to what works in human experience to enrich the lives and minds of all of us, that is, what preserves the authentic nature of our life processes. Ultimate truth has the same mysterious property as love if we acknowledge the unknown. It is a yearning and an ideal and therefore espoused by philosophers and spiritual leaders as an important topic of our conversation even though some things are only seen 'through a glass, darkly.'

The good news about our stories is that we cannot do without, and we actually thrive on, fantasy and make believe. Imagination plays a central role in meaning-making, reasoning and understanding. Mark Johnson's first book *The Body in the Mind - The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason* began with these words:

'Without imagination, nothing in the world would be meaningful. Without imagination, we could never make sense of our experience. Without imagination, we could never reason toward knowledge of reality.'

Throughout this book I will expand on the reasons for this. A psychotherapist friend of mine believed it was advantageous sometimes to get people to tell lies deliberately. He found that if you ask people to dream up what they really aspired to achieve, their 'wounded self' often limited their imagination, but if you dared them to lie deliberately about something they had done their minds embraced more of their full potential. Children often lie about having done 'brave' and 'grown-up' things and these are the kind of things they feel they would like to do one day.

What about the harmful consequences of believing those parts of our stories that have simply been imagined or perhaps we have picked up from someone else's fabricated story? Psychologists have found that it's not difficult to plant a fictional incident into another person's story simply by mentioning it; patients will often tell that story back to them later as if it was part of their early life; for example, being lost in shopping centre. In Chapter 3 we will consider the most unhelpful of lies we tell ourselves.

But there are so many positive and enjoyable uses of our imagination. Let's take the example used by Benjamin Bergen in *Louder Than Words*, the idea that pigs might fly. Imagine a flying pig in sufficient detail that you can tell your friend about it. How many wings does it have? Where are they attached? Or does it just have a cape like Superman? What shape is it? There

will be many different versions of a flying pig; and that's perfectly okay, in fact it's rather fun. Shared fantasies are a wonderful aspect of our story-making mind because they have the property of a playful, loving relationship that is respectful rather than manipulative.

We need our story to provide the stable framework within which we try to accommodate all the new stuff we experience every day. Mind and feelings are a continuous flow of meaning held together by a story. Our personal reality is the story that gives us our individuality and autonomy, but we also need to be connected in honest, open ways so we can update that story continually. It is human nature to enjoy this process enormously in an atmosphere of love and play.